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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CLASSIFICATION)

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TAGS: PTER PGOV PREL KDEM I2

SUBJECT: PRT MUTHANNA: WITH RETURN OF SHEIKH KASHAN,  
POLITICAL PRAGMATISM SHAPES NEW ATTITUDE TOWARD IRAN

REF: 09 BAGHDAD 2001

Classified By: OPA Director Greta Holtz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Muthanna reporting cable.

¶2. (S) SUMMARY: Recently returned from his self-imposed exile in Germany, Sheikh Hakim Khazal Kashan hopes to win a seat in the Council of Representatives (COR) from Muthanna. In a surprising change of political attitude, he is running as part of the Iraqi National Assembly (INA) list in the national election. When he fled Iraq in July 2009, the Sheikh was anti-sectarian and distrustful of Iranian influence. Kashan's abrupt shift from an anti-sectarian, anti-Iran political outlook to the announcement that he would run for office under the INA banner reflects both his political pragmatism and survival instinct. Kashan seems to believe that a growing Iranian role in southern Iraq is resulting in greater public support for the INA, and apparently wants to capitalize on this in the upcoming national election. END SUMMARY.

THE RETURN OF SHEIKH HAKIM

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¶3. (C) Sheikh Hakim Khazal Kashan of the Al Burkat tribe met with the PRT on January 19 to provide an update on his activities. He resigned his seat in the Provincial Council (PC) and fled Iraq in July 2009, after reporting that he was being targeted by an Iranian assassination unit (reftel). He returned to Iraq from Germany a little over a month ago. Kashan proudly announced that he was running for a seat in the COR in the upcoming national election as part of the INA list. (NOTE: Given the circumstances of his abrupt departure from the political scene and his previous strong preference for political parties that operate without "outside influence," PRTOffs were surprised to hear that he would run with the INA. End Note.)

A NEW SENSE OF PRAGMATISM

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¶4. (C) Kashan explained his decision in pragmatic terms. He noted that running for office under the INA umbrella affords him several important benefits: (1) the strength and appeal of a national party; (2) good standing within the INA because they recruited him based on his reputation for honesty and anti-corruption policies; and (3) protection from vote rigging by the Governorate Electoral Office. Kashan claims to have been recruited by other major parties and that without the "cover" of a major list, election officials could easily manipulate his tally.

¶5. (S) When asked about his apparent change on Iran, Kashan was very candid: "Iranian influence is a realistic and unchangeable fact. Even allies, such as Kurds, want the

Iranian influence to keep the United States helping them and prevent too much nationalization and centralization. Also, the recent candidate exclusion is connected. Iranian influence will unfold further as the election develops."

POLITICAL CALCULATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

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¶ 6. (C) The Sheikh believes he will do well in the upcoming election because the public appeared to support him after his resignation, and approve of his reasons for resigning. According to Kashan, potential voters appreciated his stand against corruption when he was the head of the PC Integrity Committee. They know he left because his life was being threatened for exposing corrupt officials. Kashan asserted that many people in the Al Suwair area (a rural enclave outside Samawah) will support him. (Comment: Whether or not this will net him one of the seven Muthanna COR seats is an open question. End Comment.) The people in his tribal area, he argues, know that they have been forsaken by the provincial government because of their support for him.

¶ 7. (C) Kashan stated that he was going to stay out of the provincial political game in order to keep the trust of the people. His focus is to make an impact on Baghdad using the many national level contacts he developed while living in Europe. He offered two reasons why he believes that he will be victorious on election day. First, the open list format places him directly before the people. Second, the Shi'ite people in the south see the INA as "their list." (COMMENT: Election results will go a long way to confirming whether Kashan's calculation is correct. The INA has recruited some very popular leaders, like Kashan, to run for the COR enhancing their reputation as the "list for the South." Da'wa may be vulnerable in Muthanna because of a perceived

failure to deliver on essential services in the province.  
END COMMENT.)

¶ 8. (S) COMMENT: A year ago, Sheikh Hakim Khazal Kashan would not have considered running with a sectarian party that was pro-Iranian. Now that he is in the INA fold, his power play to launch himself from minor party PC representative with the tribal-based Middle Euphrates Gathering to a major national party player in the COR is remarkable. He seems to want to reap what he sees as the benefits of growing Iranian influence in southern Iraq, while presenting a veneer of incorruptibility. The PRT's day-to-day contacts express a growing frustration with the central government and worry that Baghdad does not care about this poorest of provinces. Many interlocutors viewed Maliki's recent visit as more politics than leadership. Those vulnerabilities suggest that INA may do well in Muthanna. They will likely share top vote tallies with State of Law necessitating interesting discussions in Muthanna following the elections. END COMMENT.

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